

a coloring book of
Early Composers

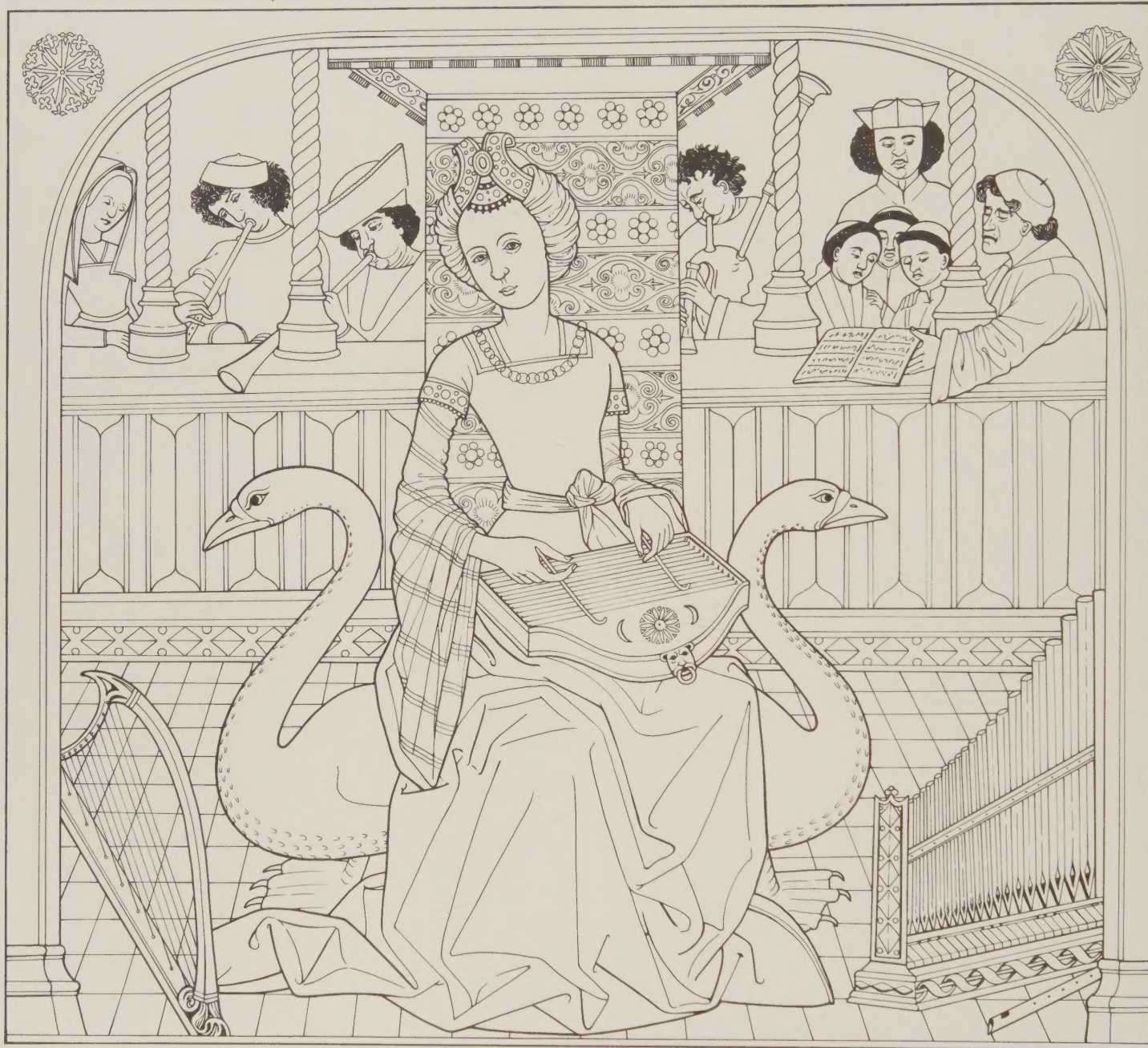


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MUSIC from *Les Échecs amoureux*, Robinet Testard, late 15th century; Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris



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Early Composers

Text by Eric Tomb, Drawings by Nancy Conkle

*You'll also enjoy Bellerophon's
GREAT WOMAN COMPOSERS!*



From the fresco in Pisa, 1360

Josquin des Prez

c. 1440-1521

King Louis XII of France was a kind and generous man, a patron of the arts, and a musical dunce. He was so impressed by one composition of Josquin des Prez that he asked the master to produce a work that he himself could help perform. Josquin came up with a piece in which the king, singing the central part, had only to repeat a single note, which the lower and higher voices could support and embellish.

Making fun of a king was a risky business, but Josquin knew just how far he could go with his patrons — he had written a number of motets reminding them of promised gifts — and Louis rewarded him handsomely. He may have figured that Josquin, as the greatest composer of his time, deserved more tolerance than lesser talents and that even a joke of his was worth more than another man's most serious effort.

Others certainly agreed. After possibly studying with the great composers Dufay and Ockeghem, Josquin had left his native Burgundy in 1459 to sing bass in the cathedral choir in Milan. His reputation, both as singer and composer, spread quickly, and in the next forty-five years he served the Dukes of Milan and Ferrara, the Pope, the Kings of France and Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor.

But unlike most of his contemporaries, who were totally dependent on unreliable jobs with capricious patrons, Josquin enjoyed a unique, long-lasting relationship with one benefactor. From the mid-1470s on, he had some connection or other with Ascanio Sforza, younger brother of the Duke of Milan, who soon became a Cardinal and was a frequent candidate for Pope. Josquin followed him into exile (Naples and Ferrara), power (Rome), crisis (Milan) and imprisonment (France). It was only a short time before Ascanio's death in 1505 that Josquin retired from the world of power and took a priestly position back home in Burgundy.

His association with Ascanio gave Josquin the freedom to work for others when he wanted, but also to work for himself alone. He was apparently the first composer to write pieces independent of a particular commission or occasion. He was also the first to have his own works printed in an individual volume.

Martin Luther, a shrewd appreciator of both music and power, remarked that Josquin was "master of the notes. They have to do what he wants; the other composers must do what the notes want."



IOSQVINVS PRATENSIS

From a woodcut from Petrus Opmeer, *Opus Chronographicum Orbis Universi*, Antwerp, 1611

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

c. 1526-1594

Pope Marcellus II had only held office for a few days before he tried to shake up the papal choir. Upset by the sloppy singing during the Good Friday ceremonies, he called the entire choir before him for a lecture on proper deportment. He especially insisted that they sing so that the words could be heard and understood.

Marcellus died three weeks later and his successor, Paul IV, chose a different way to reform the choir, dismissing the singers who were married or had published secular songs. Although Palestrina was one of these, the firing didn't seem to faze him. He was a mediocre singer, resented by the rest of the choir as a political appointee, and he quickly found another, non-singing job. But Marcellus's words must have moved him deeply: during the next five years he wrote the *Missa Papae Marcelli*, a perfect response to the Pope's demand and the first of his great mature works.

Palestrina had grown up in the heyday of polyphonic music, when composers delighted in weaving many voices around a basic text, to the point that the words were often unintelligible. He had shown a clear talent for this style and had risen rapidly in the Roman musical world. But his basic inclination seems to have been toward simpler, subtler and more expressive music. Marcellus's lecture inspired him to follow his own path, and he now developed a style of polyphony in which the voices joined and separated around melodies and blocks of harmony which mirrored and extended the meaning of the sacred text, rather than merely showing off the composer's ingenuity.

Palestrina's day-to-day life was a mixture of the religious and the secular. From boyhood on he was constantly employed by church organizations, but he also spent time selling wine, building and renting houses and running a fur business, and he was always eager to get the highest possible price for his work. After his wife and two of his sons died, he prepared to enter the priesthood, only to marry a wealthy widow instead.

But there is no uncertainty at all in his music. While most of his secular madrigals are heavy and graceless, his masses and motets provided an inexhaustible outlet for his deepest feelings and subtlest craft. Just before it became obsolete, Palestrina rescued classic polyphony and brought it to its greatest perfection.

Palestrina presenting his first volume of masses to Pope Julius III, Rome, 1554



Orlando di Lasso

c. 1532-1594

In 1580 the Elector of Saxony tried to lure Lasso away from his job in Bavaria. Lasso turned him down as graciously as he could. He had, he explained, "a house, and garden and other real estate" in Munich and "was also beginning to grow old."

He was actually only forty-eight, but the times were rougher then and he had been on the road since he was twelve. His beautiful voice had attracted Ferrante Gonzago, an Italian general fighting near his home in what is now Belgium, and Lasso had followed his patron to Paris, Mantua, Sicily and Milan. Other patrons took him to Naples and Rome, and he became choirmaster at the important Roman church of St. John Lateran when he was only twenty-one. Returning home a few years later, he spent several months in Antwerp, the commercial capital of Europe, and then went to work for Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria. He became *Kapellmeister* after a few years and kept the job for the rest of his life.

Although he still had to travel great distances recruiting musicians, performing at diplomatic functions and keeping track of the general state of the musical world, Lasso's Bavarian post was probably the best job any composer has ever had. Music was even more important to Duke Albrecht and his family than to other rulers of the time; *Kapellmeister* Lasso was well-paid, greatly honored and a personal friend of the Duke and his son Wilhelm. His responsibilities were also great: he had to oversee music for religious services and for the Duke's entertainments, supervise musical education for the choir members and the Duke's family, and provide material for the Duke's musical library. And of course he had to compose.

One of the most prolific and wide-ranging composers (and certainly the most famous) of his time, Lasso produced numerous masses, motets and other religious works, and Italian madrigals, French *chansons* and German *Lieder* (all really just songs, but with a distinct flavor and style for each language). He paralleled Palestrina in bringing traditional polyphony to its last high peak; the two of them were the only polyphonic composers whose works continued to be played in the following centuries.

His garden also survived. It remained in the family until the eighteenth century, when a church was built on part of the site. The rest remains today, a plot of green in the middle of downtown Munich.



*Quantum exit melica reliquos Orlandus in arte,
Ætherys propior tantum abit ille choris.*

Giovanni Gabrieli

c. 1557-1612

Andrea Gabrieli was an obscure Venetian organist before he went to Munich to work for the Duke of Bavaria. In his few years there, he met a large circle of sophisticated, cosmopolitan musicians, centered around the great Orlando di Lasso, and he returned to Venice to become organist at St. Mark's Cathedral and one of the leading composers in the city. When his nephew Giovanni showed signs of musical talent, Andrea made sure that he had the same opportunity.

Giovanni went to Munich when the Bavarian musical establishment was at its peak, with over sixty musicians employed at the court. The musicians were so involved in court life, and the court so involved with the hectic politics of southern Germany, that Giovanni made as many friends among bankers, merchants and the nobility as he did with musicians like Lasso. Even after he returned to Venice, he dedicated most of his published works to powerful Germans rather than Italians.

Leaving Munich just as the Bavarian court was cutting back on its musical staff, Giovanni returned to Venice just as St. Mark's was enlarging its. Andrea arranged to have him chosen second organist at the Cathedral, and his career was soon in full swing.

Although Giovanni's madrigals were the first pieces to bring him wide fame, he seems to have written these as a matter of course — every composer was expected to do so — and without much enthusiasm. His real love was the organ (he played at the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco* as well) and, beyond that, large-scale vocal and instrumental works. He was particularly fond of breaking his choruses into several groups, which would sometimes sing together, sometimes against one another; sometimes each chorus would itself break into several voices. He then began to fit instrumental groups in with the choruses and finally wrote music for instruments alone. Small bands of instruments had accompanied singers and dancers for years, but these were the first real orchestras.

This was obviously the music of the future, and instrumental music was soon commonplace. But, because he mostly wrote in the old polyphonic style, Gabrieli himself was largely forgotten in Italy. It was only in Germany and the North that students like Heinrich Schütz carried on the tradition that Giovanni had first discovered there.

*Blame not my lute for he must sound
Of this and that as liketh me.
For lack of wit the lute is bound
To give such tunes as pleaseth me;
Though my songs be somewhat strange,
And speak such words as touch thy change,
Blame not my lute.*

Sir Thomas Wyatt



A lute player from the time of Giovanni Gabrieli, after Bartolomeo Veneto, J. Paul Getty Museum



Don Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa

1560-1613

The first twenty-five years of his life must have been perfect for a man of Gesualdo's temperament. The second son of Prince Fabrizio of Venosa (who was also Count of Consa, Lord of Gesualdo, Marquis of Laino and a dozen other things), he could enjoy wealth and high rank without much concern for politics or power. Music was his greatest passion, and he was able to assemble a private academy of eminent musicians and composers.

Then his elder brother died, leaving Carlo heir to all the family domains, with the clear responsibility to marry and continue the Gesualdo line. His chosen bride was his cousin Maria d'Avalos, one of the great beauties of the age, who had been both widowed and divorced before she was twenty-five. The marriage succeeded in producing a son — clearly its main purpose — but in little else. Maria took a lover and in 1590 Gesualdo murdered the pair while they were sleeping in the family palace in Naples.

Fearing revenge, he fled to the ancestral castle in the town of Gesualdo, but the scandal eventually blew over, and in 1591 he succeeded his father as Prince of Venosa. When he married again in 1594 — you couldn't feel safe with only one son in those days — he avoided unreliable beauties and chose



the virtuous Leonora d'Este, cousin of the Duke of Ferrara. Ferrara was then the cultural capital of Italy and Gesualdo must have felt that, whatever else happened, he would be back in the mainstream of music.

The second marriage was not much happier than the first. The couple was not very compatible and their only son died in early childhood. But there was no bloodshed and Gesualdo was able to concentrate on music once more. The style he had developed for his madrigals was unique for his time — and remained so until the twentieth century. While other composers were moving toward the “classical” system of tonal harmony, according to which only certain combinations of notes could be used together, Gesualdo felt free to use whatever notes he thought were most expressive. Since the feelings he needed to express were often harsh or painful, his music could seem disturbingly dissonant.

Gesualdo's only son died a few months before his father. His two marriages had been in vain and the Gesualdo line expired. His music almost suffered a similar fate, but it found a few champions in every generation. Now, after 400 years, it is finally coming into its own.

The *Camerata* or the “New Music”

If you had been writing traditional polyphony in the sixteenth century, it would have been easy to pretend that you were following the pattern of classical Greek music. The set of scales or “modes” that were the basis of every composition all had Greek names, each one associated with a particular mood or purpose; you might use a Dorian mode for one occasion, a Lydian mode for another, and so on. After you had set a text in the proper mode for the leading voice (the tenor), you added other voices (usually up to five), each singing the same words a little later (as in *Frère Jacques* and other rounds), but carefully arranged so that all the notes sung at the same time would be harmonious.

But as the humanist scholars of Renaissance Italy probed deeper into their classical texts, they discovered that ancient Greek music was not at all what they had imagined. Not only were the modes completely different from the ones that had developed in the medieval Church, but the ancients had never interwoven several distinct voices at all. Their singing, it now seemed, was a somewhat formless drone, more like the chanting of a Catholic priest than the elaborate choral singing that had grown up around it.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, a group of scholars interested in reviving Greek musical drama began to meet at the palace of Count Giovanni Bardi in Florence. Sometimes known as the *Camerata* (“chamber” or “salon”), they made a number of experiments in what they called “monody,” a single melodic line sung either solo or in chorus. Dramatic monody could take form as “recitative,” (a kind of declamation halfway between singing and speaking, used for dialogue) or solo or choral “arias” (more melodic songs expressing feelings or commenting on the action). It was also the perfect method for harmoniously combining a variety of different instruments. Using all these monodic techniques, Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini produced the first true operas in Florence in 1594 and 1600. The ideas spread quickly and in 1600 Emilio de Cavaliere’s largely monodic oratorio appeared in Rome.

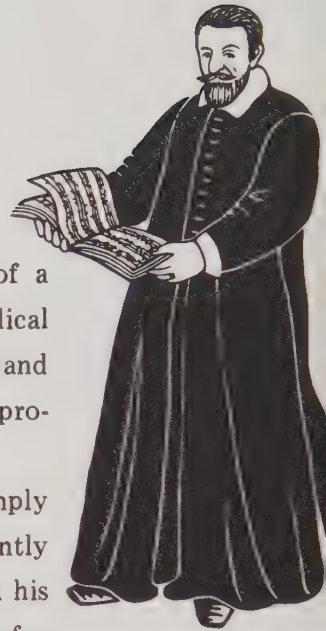
The “New Music,” as Caccini called it, was actually no closer to Greek practice than polyphony had been. But it was an ideal focus for the secular, instrumental impulses that were pushing through the crumbling framework of the old polyphony. In one way or another, almost all music written in the next three centuries grew out of the experiments of the *Camerata*.



After the Master of the Female Halflengths, Schloss Rohrau

Claudio Monteverdi

1567-1643



Like Beethoven two centuries later, Monteverdi was the focus of a musical revolution. The first great composer of operas — then a radical innovation — he also introduced startling new techniques into madrigals and formal church music. It was natural that he would be a hero to the progressives and an enemy to the conservatives of his time.

Yet Monteverdi himself was anything but a revolutionary. He was simply the best composer around in a time of rapid musical change. Constantly experimenting in a number of different fields, he developed one way in his operas, another in his madrigals and a third in his church music. He tried for over thirty years to formulate a general theory of music before finally abandoning the task. His one clear general principle — “the text should be the master, not the servant of the music” — points directly at the abuses of the florid late polyphony, but it is a tenet that both Palestrina and Lasso would have shared.

Working directly in the polyphonic tradition, Monteverdi published a book of motets when he was fifteen and followed it with three more books by the time he was twenty. After he left his native Cremona in 1590 to work at the court of Duke Vincenzo I of Mantua, he began to absorb the new musical techniques. His madrigals tended increasingly toward monody and, after he began to write operas, it would have been easy for him to switch completely to the new style. But he reworked the lament from his opera *Arianna*, probably his most popular single composition, both as a five-part madrigal and, with new words, as a solo religious motet. And, after being dismissed from his frustrating, poorly-paid post in Mantua, he became the well-paid, highly honored *maestro di cappella* at St. Mark's in Venice, where his main job was overseeing polyphonic services.

For all his variety and flexibility, Monteverdi really did incorporate the spirit of the new music. The only one with the genius to make exciting music out of the recent theories, he strained to make his works emotionally expressive. In his “agitated style” of orchestration, he introduced a number of new techniques, including tremolo (very rapid bowing to indicate strong emotion) and pizzicato (plucking violin strings). Never letting up, he wrote his greatest opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* the year before his death at seventy-six.



Girolamo Frescobaldi

1583-1643

From Josquin to Gesualdo, from Ariosto to Tasso, the little Duchy of Ferrara supported some of the finest composers and writers in Italy. But the Duchy lost its independence just as its greatest native composer came of age, and Girolamo Frescobaldi spent almost all of his creative years far south in Rome.

He was in many ways a typical Ferrarese. The Duchy was so well situated, so wealthy from agriculture and manufacturing and so well governed that its citizens had unusual opportunities to apply themselves to culture and the arts, especially music. They tended as a result to be leisured, cultivated and refined or lazy, irresponsible and vain, depending on your point of view. And they naturally made quite a fuss about a talent like Frescobaldi, who was an outstanding singer as a young child and an organ virtuoso by his mid-teens. The Duke's organist became his teacher. After the Duke's death, when Ferrara was absorbed into the Papal States, Frescobaldi followed the procession of notable Ferrarese to Rome.

It was soon apparent that he had more talent than tact. The diplomatic flair which had for centuries preserved Ferrara from its more powerful neighbors never showed up in Frescobaldi, and his impulsiveness and stubbornness brought on frequent disagreements with his patrons. But it was his talent that always won out. He had a job as organist for the Julian Choir at St. Peter's Church in Rome almost from the start of his career, and each new patron was a step higher in the social scale than the one before. After 1634 he worked for the relatives of Pope Urban VIII.

Frescobaldi's contemporary reputation rested mostly on his skill at the organ, harpsichord and other keyboard instruments.

It was generally admitted that he could play these instruments better than anyone else in Italy, and there were even a few strangely tuned instruments that only he could play at all and then "only with great preparation . . ." He dabbled, like all musicians of his time, in other areas, producing a number of vocal and orchestral works. But his talent remained stubbornly concentrated. His keyboard compositions demonstrated both his own virtuosity and his ability to master the new style of secular melodic music. They became the models for several generations, the first keyboard classics of the seventeenth century.



Frescobaldi after Jean Saillant

Thomas Tallis

c. 1505-1585

The English Reformation was a bit of a muddle. King Henry VIII had been such a staunch foe of Lutheranism that the Pope had honored him with the title “Defender of the Faith,” but a few years later he broke completely with Rome, declared himself head of the English Church and confiscated the property of the English monasteries. Henry’s son Edward VI maintained the national church during his six-year reign, but his successor Mary Tudor returned the country to Catholicism in her five years as queen, and it was only during the forty-four year rule of Elizabeth I that the Church of England finally took hold.

Thomas Tallis was lucky to be a musician in a time when, whatever else was happening, kings, queens and churches were always demanding newer and grander music. Although he seem to have remained a Catholic at heart (he preferred to set Latin texts), he was willing to apply his art wherever it was needed, and he wrote some of the first great Anglican music.

More than for most other composers, Tallis’s music was his life, and we know few nonmusical facts about him. His early years are obscure, but by the late 1530s he was head organist at Waltham Abbey. After the abolition of the monasteries, he served briefly at Canterbury Cathedral and then joined the Chapel Royal, the King’s private choir, as first organist. He remained there for the rest of his life (some forty years), playing and composing for Henry, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth and working with the best singers and musicians in the land. In his last decade he worked closely with his pupil William Byrd. The two men received a monopoly on music publishing in 1575 and released a book of their own Latin motets the same year.

By then Tallis was near the end of his creative life. Like his country, musically, he had been a slow and steady developer. When he first joined the Chapel Royal, England was still a musical backwater and Tallis himself a better organist than composer. But he had the chance to experiment in all directions, from extremely complex polyphony (he wrote one motet for forty independent voices) to the stark and austere works of his last years. At his best, he was as good as Palestrina and Lasso, and he paved the way for the Golden Age of English Music.

Thomas Tallis after Nicola Haym, c. 1729



*Ye sacred Muses, race of Jove,
Whom Music's love delighteth,
Come down from crystal heavens above*

*To earth where Sorrow dwelleth
In mourning weeds, with tears in eyes.
Tallis is dead, and Music dies.*

—Wm. Byrd

William Byrd

1543-1623

1588 was not a good year for Spain's Armada. It didn't conquer England the way it was supposed to and not very much of it made its way back to Spain. The English, who were naturally very pleased with this turn of events, had another reason for celebration as well. 1588 was also the year of William Byrd's *Psalms, Sonnets and Songs*. Only the third book of English songs ever printed, it was the first to adapt the Italian madrigal style to native use. It was so popular that Byrd published another volume, *Songs of Sundrie Natures*, the following year and the Elizabethan craze for madrigal-singing was under way.

Byrd was used to this sort of success. Unlike his teacher and colleague Thomas Tallis, he quickly mastered and expanded every musical form he touched. He was probably a musical prodigy and became organist at the important cathedral in Lincoln when he was only twenty, a member of the Chapel Royal when he was twenty-seven. He was equally good at making friends with the most powerful men of the time. By the time he settled in London, he was already one of the most important and influential composers in the country.

Like so many of the great composers in the glory days of English Protestantism and patriotism, Byrd was Catholic. Unlike most of the others, he must have felt so secure in his ability and his connections that he made no secret of the fact. He and his family were repeatedly cited for refusing to attend Anglican church services, and he openly circulated and even published his settings for the Latin Mass. But he was equally ready to produce music for English church services and to compose for concerts of viols (cello-like instruments played with curved bows) and for the virginal (a small kind of harpsichord), and also secular songs. No one else could do so much so well.

Yet there was a constant tension in Byrd's life and music. Many of his songs and keyboard pieces are light and graceful, and he clearly enjoyed the fame and comfort his work had brought him. But he was always fighting something — often courageously standing up for his religion, but just as often going to court in some trivial lawsuit. And the underlying tone of his music is grave and otherworldly, as if he could not quite accept the changes he was living through and would have preferred to have remained with Tallis in the world of medieval Christianity.

*Since singing is so good a thing,
I wish that all men would learn to sing.*



William Byrd after Nicola Haym, c. 1729

Thomas Morley

1557-1602

To an Italian composer, a madrigal was like a bowl of pasta: it could be almost any size, any shape; the challenge lay in getting all the noodles (voices) to flow harmoniously in the same direction at more or less the same time. If everything was cooking well, it was a relatively simple matter to pour on some sauce and spices (ornamentation). It was a comfortable, everyday sort of recipe; if it didn't quite work one day, you could always try another one tomorrow.

The English couldn't take anything quite so lightly. When they finally got to studying and then writing madrigals of their own, they did it very systematically. Surprisingly, they did it very well. Unsurprisingly, the one who did it best of all, Thomas Morley, was also the man who had the lightest touch and wrote the first great English musical cookbook.

Morley was a student of Byrd, who had written the first true English madrigals. He tried to match Byrd's immense range of composition and produced some weighty and old-fashioned church music and rather stiff instrumental pieces, but his music flowed most clearly and fully in his own madrigals. Some of these are reworkings of Italian originals (many composers used the same tunes in those days; they were more interested in development than originality), some are based on English songs, some are entirely Morley's invention. All are light and graceful; they aim to charm rather than impress or awe the listener.

If Morley's compositions tend to shine in this one particular area, his musical life was unusually wideranging, even for an Elizabethan. He was organist at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, holder of the official monopoly on musical publishing (succeeding Tallis and Byrd) and possibly, during his musical travels, a government spy. But his health was poor in the last years of his short life, which he was forced to spend quietly. The opportunity he had for study and writing led to *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*, a series of dialogues explaining how to read music and sing, how to construct simple counterpoint on a simple music and how to compose longer and more complex works. It was popular long after the madrigal craze had died down and it is still the best starting point for anyone who wants to understand Elizabethan music.

Queen Elizabeth I after
Nicholas Hilliard, 1580



*The Queen, the glory of our age and isle,
With royal favour bids this science smile;
Nor hears she only others' labor'd lays,
But, artist-like, herself both sings and plays.*

John Bull

c. 1562-1628

On one of his trips to the Netherlands, Bull supposedly met up with a local musician. The man showed him a forty-part composition he had written and challenged him to add another part. Bull took the manuscript away for a few hours; when he returned he had added not one, but forty more parts to the piece.

The story is obviously preposterous, but it says much about Bull's reputation that it was told about him rather than about one of the other brilliant English musicians of the time. The forty years after the death of Thomas Tallis were the Golden Age of English Music, the only time in history when English composers and musicians were the most admired in all Europe. Bull, who never forgot that he was *Dr. John Bull*, was at the top of the heap and proud of the fact.

His musical gifts had revealed themselves early in his life and he had done his best to develop them. He was a singer in the Chapel Royal at twelve, organist at Hereford Cathedral at twenty, organist back at the Chapel Royal at twenty-four and Doctor of Music from Cambridge at twenty-seven. He was the first Professor of Music at the new Gresham College in London in 1597; it was at the special request of Queen Elizabeth that he was the only professor allowed to lecture in English rather than Latin. He was the best keyboard performer and one of the best composers in the country.

But there was something very quarrelsome about the man. Found on his portrait are the lines

The Bull by force

But Bull by Skill

In Field doth Raigne

Good will doth Gayne

Bull was actually quite good at losing good will as well. His special demands were always a burden on his employers and patrons, though they usually valued his skills enough to overlook his orneriness. But in 1613 he left the Chapel Royal without permission and fled to the Netherlands in disgrace; it was an irrevocable step, and he never returned to England.

Most of Bull's works disappeared at the time of his flight. The keyboard pieces that remain reveal him as one of the most intricately dazzling writers of his time. One short piece, which he may have written at the time of the Spanish Armada, surfaced 150 years later. Reworked and with new words, it became the British national anthem *God Save the King*.

AN. ATATUS SUAE 27.

1589♣



John Bull after the portrait in the Music School, Oxford

John Dowland

1563-1626

In 1594 Dowland applied for a post as lutenist to Queen Elizabeth. Although the position was not filled at all (the court probably decided to save some money by leaving unessential jobs vacant), Dowland got it into his head that he had been passed over because of his religion (he was a Catholic). Frustrated and bitter, he decided to seek his fortune on the Continent. After six months in Germany, where he was received as one of the great musicians of his time, he headed toward Rome, where he planned to meet the madrigalist Luca Marenzio. But in Florence he ran into a group of English Catholics who were plotting to assassinate Queen Elizabeth. Terrified of getting involved with them, he fled back to Germany and reported the plot to the English government. Shortly thereafter, a friend wrote from London that he could probably help him win the post as the Queen's lutenist. Dowland rushed back to England, but the friend died while he was on his way and the position remained unfilled.

His life was like that. At a time when the lute was the most popular musical instrument (organs were largely restricted to churches and only the wealthier classes could afford viols and virginals), Dowland was one of the leading lutenists in Europe and probably the best-selling composer in England. Honored by all levels of society, he received a degree as Doctor of Music in England and served as lutenist to King Christian IV of Denmark. But he was a moody and impetuous man, always bitter about his failure to win the court post in England.

Though some of his pieces for lutes or for lute and voices are bright and gay, most of Dowland's music is determinedly melancholy. He "loved discords as a cat loves cream," one biographer remarked; his best work seems to have reflected his worst moods. In his most famous book, *Lachrymae or Seven Teares*, the eighth of the twenty-one pieces for a consort of lute and viols is called "Semper Dowland Semper Dolens" (Always Dowland, always grieving).

In 1612, when he was forty-nine, Dowland was finally appointed lutenist to King James I. Success may have undermined his disposition or it may have simply come too late. He wrote almost no significant music in the rest of his life.

Thomas Campion

1567-1620

While the clerics were reorganizing the English Church and the politicians were struggling over the English State, wealthy citizens of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods had to face a more vexingly personal problem: amusing themselves. Madrigals were fun for a while, but only a few people could sing at once; stage plays could be very engrossing, but the spectators had nothing at all to do but watch. A spectacle that involved its audience in the action required literary skill, classical learning and musical invention, and cost a great deal of money to

produce — in other words a “masque” — obviously fit their need. Starting around 1580, masques were a staple entertainment for English aristocrats.

Although they were meant to be performed only once, masques often involved the finest English poets, artists and musicians. Campion first provided songs for some school masques while he was studying law in London. He later switched to the study of medicine and eventually made his living as a physician, but poetry and music remained the true center of his life. As both a poet and composer, he wrote some of the most delicate and expressive English lute-songs. In addition to the songs he wrote for particular masques, he also published English and Latin verse, four books of songs and works on poetic musical theory.



A design for a masque
composed by Campion,
Whitehall, 1607



Orlando Gibbons

1583-1625

In 1613 the three greatest living English organists published a volume of keyboard pieces called *Parthenia* in honor of the wedding of King James's daughter Elizabeth. Of the three, William Byrd was seventy and essentially retired; John Bull was fifty-one and about to flee the country in disgrace; but Orlando Gibbons, possibly the best performer of them all, was only thirty and just hitting his stride. It appeared that the great creative surge in English music would continue for some time.

But fifteen years later all three men were dead and the Golden Age of English music was over. There were good musicians and sometimes good original music in the following decades, but it would be some fifty years before England again produced a truly exceptional composer.

Gibbons's death must have been especially grievous. He was still young, still quite productive, but he had published very little: there was *Parthenia* and a single book of madrigals. He had been too busy, too successful in his career at court to have time to get his works out to a wider public.

He had come from the most musical of families. His father was a Wait — a public musician — for the city of Cambridge; his older brother Edward was Master of Choristers at Kings College, Cambridge; starting in 1596, Gibbons himself had sung in the Kings College Choir. But by 1603, when he was twenty or twenty-one, he had become organist for the Chapel Royal and from then on it was one triumph after another. He received a Bachelor of Music degree from Cambridge, a Doctor of Music from Oxford. He became private virginalist for King James and organist at Westminster Abbey. He and the rest of the Chapel Royal were accompanying King Charles I to meet his new Queen, Henrietta Maria, in Canterbury, when he died suddenly of an apoplectic stroke.

It turned out that Gibbons's few publications were soon forgotten. Changing fashions, combined with a growing Puritan campaign against secular music, drove all of the old favorites out of the market. But Gibbons's religious compositions hung on: although he had never formally published them, his full Services for Anglican worship, as well as many of his anthems, remained in use until the end of the nineteenth century, when he was one of the first of the now "classic" English composers to be rediscovered.

Orlando Gibbons after the Fussell
portrait, Oxford University



Michael Praetorius

c. 1571-1621

The German Reformation was a battleground. The many little states which made up the Holy Roman Empire each chose their own brand of Lutheranism, Calvinism or Catholicism. They then proceeded to fight internally against those of their citizens who didn't agree with the choice and externally against their neighbors who had chosen something else. The century after 1517 festered with big and little conflicts. From 1618 to 1648 religious warfare almost destroyed the German states.

Praetorius's father was born at the very beginning of the Reformation, studied in Wittenberg when Luther was active there and became a model Lutheran minister, simple, devout and conscientious. He lost his job several times when the religious politics of his area abruptly changed, but his honesty and courage always endeared him to his congregations. His two eldest sons also became ministers and Michael, who showed a strong inclination toward theology and classical studies, seemed destined to follow in their footsteps. But when his older brother, who had been supporting him during his studies, suddenly died, Praetorius had to fall back on his musical ability. Although relatively untrained, he became a church organist when he was sixteen. He developed so well that he became organist to Duke Heinrich Julius of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, one of the most musically pretentious of German rulers, when he was twenty-four. He became Heinrich Julius's *Kapellmeister* in 1604. After the Duke died in 1613, he worked, sometimes simultaneously, for a number of other German princes.

Bringing to his music the earnest dedication his father and brothers had displayed in their ministries Praetorius produced an astonishing amount of work in his relatively short life (his fatal illness may have been the result of overwork). He wrote over 1000 religious pieces based mostly on Lutheran hymns and biblical texts and was working on an exhaustive survey of musical theory and practice, the *Syntagma musicum*, at the time of his death. But he also shared the joviality that marked German Lutheranism before the Thirty Years' War. *Terpsichore*, a sprightly set of dances in French style and his only remaining secular work, is easily the most popular of his pieces today.



From a wood engraving, 1606



Heinrich Schütz

1585-1672

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, educated Germans liked to translate their names into Greek or Latin. Michael Schultzeis, whose name meant “leader,” became Michael Praetorius. Heinrich Schütz, whose name was similar to the word for “shooter,” never formally changed it, but to friends he liked to call himself “Sagittarius,” the Archer of the Zodiac. The choice was both appropriate and ironic. Schütz was a dynamic, forceful man, the chief advocate of musical reform in Germany. But his life was largely shaped by external forces. His personal life was tragic and war and politics determined the course of his musical career. This combination of creativity and passivity, strength and suffering, increasingly marked his musical output; balancing technical mastery and emotional sensitivity, he created the most significant German music before Bach.

The son of a prosperous Saxon innkeeper, Schütz attracted the attention of Landgrave Moritz of Hesse. In spite of his obvious musical gifts, his family wanted him to become a lawyer; even after the Landgrave had sent him to study with Giovanni Gabrieli in Venice, they insisted he resume his legal studies; by the time he had enough of a reputation as a musician to insure that he could make a good living, the neighboring Elector of Saxony asserted his superior power and claimed him as his *Kapellmeister*.

The Elector was a powerful prince who seemed to be keeping his land out of the Thirty Years' War. Schütz married and threw himself into adapting the latest Italian innovations to German music. But by 1628 everything had fallen apart. His wife had died (both his children also died during his lifetime), Saxony was about to be invaded by foreign troops, and the Elector had no money to pay his musicians. Schütz avoided much of the war by returning to Venice to study with Monteverdi and then worked for the King of Denmark. He was still the Elector's employee, however, and had to report regularly at court, whether he was paid or not. He applied repeatedly for retirement, but was kept at work until he was well over seventy.

Aside from some court extravaganzas (and the first German opera), Schütz's music was vocal and religious. From his start as a champion of Italian monody to his end as a reviver of German polyphony, he dissolved his personal suffering in music filled with compassion and joy.



After a portrait thought to be Heinrich Schütz by Rembrandt, 1633, Corcoran Gallery of Art

Dietrich Buxtehude

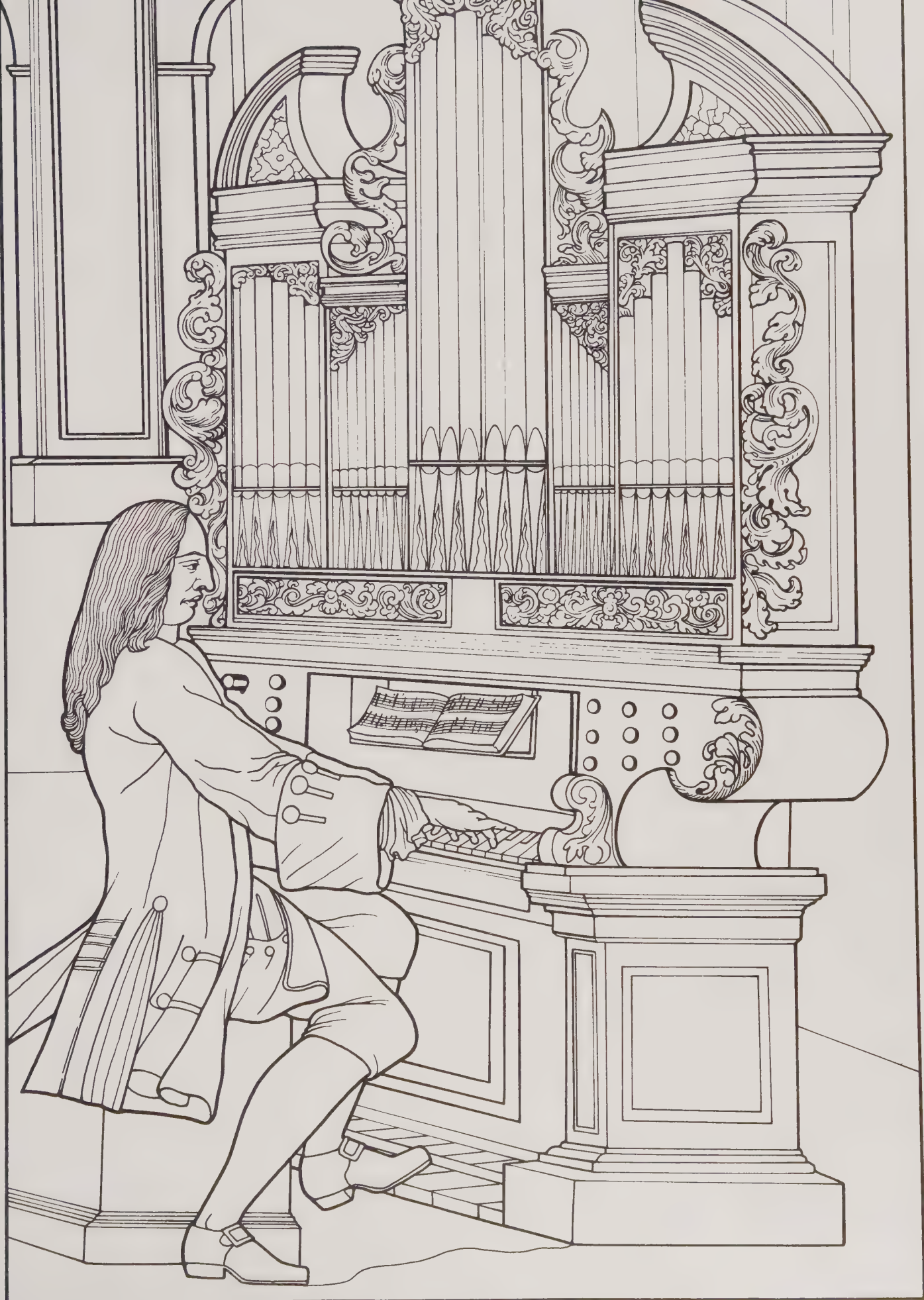
1637-1707

For more than 1,000 years the organ was the Queen of European instruments, the only one allowed in church services. The numerous strings, woodwinds, horns and percussion instruments that evolved over the years were always musical poor cousins, suitable perhaps for dancing or popular theatricals but never for accompanying sacred song. But after 1500 composers grew increasingly fond of supporting voices with a stringed instrument and then of combining different sorts of instruments even without voices. By 1600, Gabrieli dared to use small orchestras in church ceremonies. There was only one possible response to a threat like this: bigger, louder and more flexible organs.

While orchestral music spread most rapidly in Italy, it was northern Europe and especially Germany that led in the expansion of the organ. Buxtehude, who was born in Denmark, worked a while in Sweden and spent his last forty years in Germany, was near the center of this ferment, and most of the facts we know about him have to do with organ-playing. His father, who was probably his music teacher, was an organist; to win his post at the Marienkirche in the German city of Lübeck, it seems that he had to marry the previous organist's daughter. He had to travel less than 200 miles from his hometown to Lübeck; he may have once ventured the fifty miles to examine an organ in nearby Hamburg; otherwise, he settled in Lübeck, played the organ and composed.

He was hardly isolated. There was a lively exchange of musical manuscripts in those days and knowledgeable amateurs, usually merchants or diplomats, carried musical news from one town to another. As he developed into the outstanding organist of his generation, Buxtehude found that many others would travel long distances to hear him play. When twenty years old, Bach walked 225 miles for the privilege. He had a four-week leave from his job, but stayed four months in Lübeck and had to find a new job because of his stay.

But the attractions of instrumental music were too strong for even a great organist to resist. A few years after he settled in Lübeck, Buxtehude initiated a series of five dramatic concerts (called *Abendmusik*, "evening music") every year. They were immensely popular, drawing perhaps even more visitors than his organ playing. But they inspired few imitators, and Buxtehude's choral and instrumental music are just now receiving the renewed attention which his organ works, famous as an inspiration to Bach, have long enjoyed.



The Organist, after J. C. Weigel, *Musicalisches Theatrum*, 1715

Jean-Baptiste Lully

1632-87

A century after an Italian general led the young Orlando di Lasso south from his French-speaking homeland, a French officer brought Giovanni Battista Lulli north from Florence. The tides of musical influence in Europe were constantly shifting and a 200-year period of Italian predominance was now beginning. But it took only a few years working around the French court for the young Lulli to discover that, however talented and innovative Italian musicians might be, they were not individually popular with the French public. As his career was beginning to take off, he made a point of assuming French citizenship and giving his name a French form. In the next three decades, he became the leading figure and eventually the virtual dictator of the French musical world.

It may have helped that he was not that much of a musician to begin with. The son, most likely, of a miller, he had picked up a bit of dancing and fiddling from the wandering performers in the Florentine markets when the Chevalier de Guise selected him as a servant and Italian teacher for his cousin, Madame Montpensier, back in Paris. He was working in her kitchen when his fiddling came to her attention; she arranged his first formal music lessons with one of the leading French composers.

And it can't have hurt that her cousin was King Louis XIV. The young king loved dancing, both as a spectator and a performer. Lully was only twenty-one when he offered some new pieces for a ballet that Louis was to dance in. The ballet was a great success and Lully soon entered Louis's service. He consolidated his position as Louis's favorite musician, and for twenty years produced a steady stream of ballets and musical extravaganzas for the court and the public. These pieces created a new style of French music, based on dances and popular songs; the operas he wrote after 1673 carried the revolution into vocal music.

Lully was proud and impetuous and used his influence to stifle rivals and increase his own power. He conducted in this character, thumping the floor with a heavy staff whose beat was inescapable. In 1687, conducting his own *Te Deum* in honor of King Louis's recovery from an illness, he hit his foot harder than he realized. The wound turned gangrenous, but Lully refused any surgery and died while working on his next opera.



Lully after P. Mignard

François Couperin

1668-1733

Although they never met (they never even left their own countries), two of the greatest organists of the early eighteenth century apparently carried on a long correspondence on musical matters. No one knows what happened to Couperin's letters to Bach; Bach's letters to Couperin disappeared after being used as lids for jam pots. But to others Bach expressed his admiration for Couperin's "elegance and voluptuous melancholy in certain motifs, precision and nobility of rhythm, and a sobriety which is not always forced, but rather displays a praiseworthy discretion." In other words, we would say today, Couperin wrote French music and did it very well.

Distinctly "French" music was a fairly new creation then. The Italian Lully had turned his back on his own heritage and woven the existing threads of French popular, court and religious music into a distinct and unified form. Because he was working for the public, Lully created a theatrical, rhetorical style; when Couperin went on to write more personal and religious music, he inevitably brought along some of Lully's public mood.

Like Bach, Couperin was part of a great musical family; but, whereas Bach's reputation was temporarily eclipsed by that of his sons, no one ever forgot that it was François who was "The Great" Couperin. He had inherited his job as organist at the important church of St. Gervais in Paris when his father died (the post remained in the family for three more generations). Only eleven at the time, he had to farm out the actual playing to another organist, but he was ready to assume his full duties when he was seventeen; at twenty-five, he was one of the organists to King Louis XIV.

Personally, the rest of Couperin's life was a series of triumphs. After King Louis ennobled him, he became music instructor to the royal children, then director of the entire royal musical establishment. Musically, it was a time of experimentation and refinement. Writing in every field except the theater itself, he was free to take Lully's theatrical style into entirely new realms; without Lully's fear of foreign influence, he was free to incorporate the best German and Italian innovations into his work. Especially in his harpsichord pieces, which are like miniature character studies in sound, he mixed passion and reason, aristocratic elegance and popular fun, in a manner that influenced French composers into the twentieth century.



F. Couperin, *Organiste de la Chapelle du Roy*, after A. Bouys, 1735

Henry Purcell

1659-1695

Purcell was born at just the right time. After twenty years of civil war and Puritan rule, when drama and music were discouraged and sometimes actually persecuted, England was about to have a king again. Charles II had spent many years of exile in France and when he ascended the throne in 1661, he brought to his court many of the latest continental innovations in art and music (and many foreign artists and musicians as well). Purcell's father Thomas and uncle Henry (or father Henry and uncle Thomas: biographers still can't agree which of the brothers actually sired the great composer) both became gentlemen of the reconstituted Chapel Royal just as the English musical world was coming back to life.

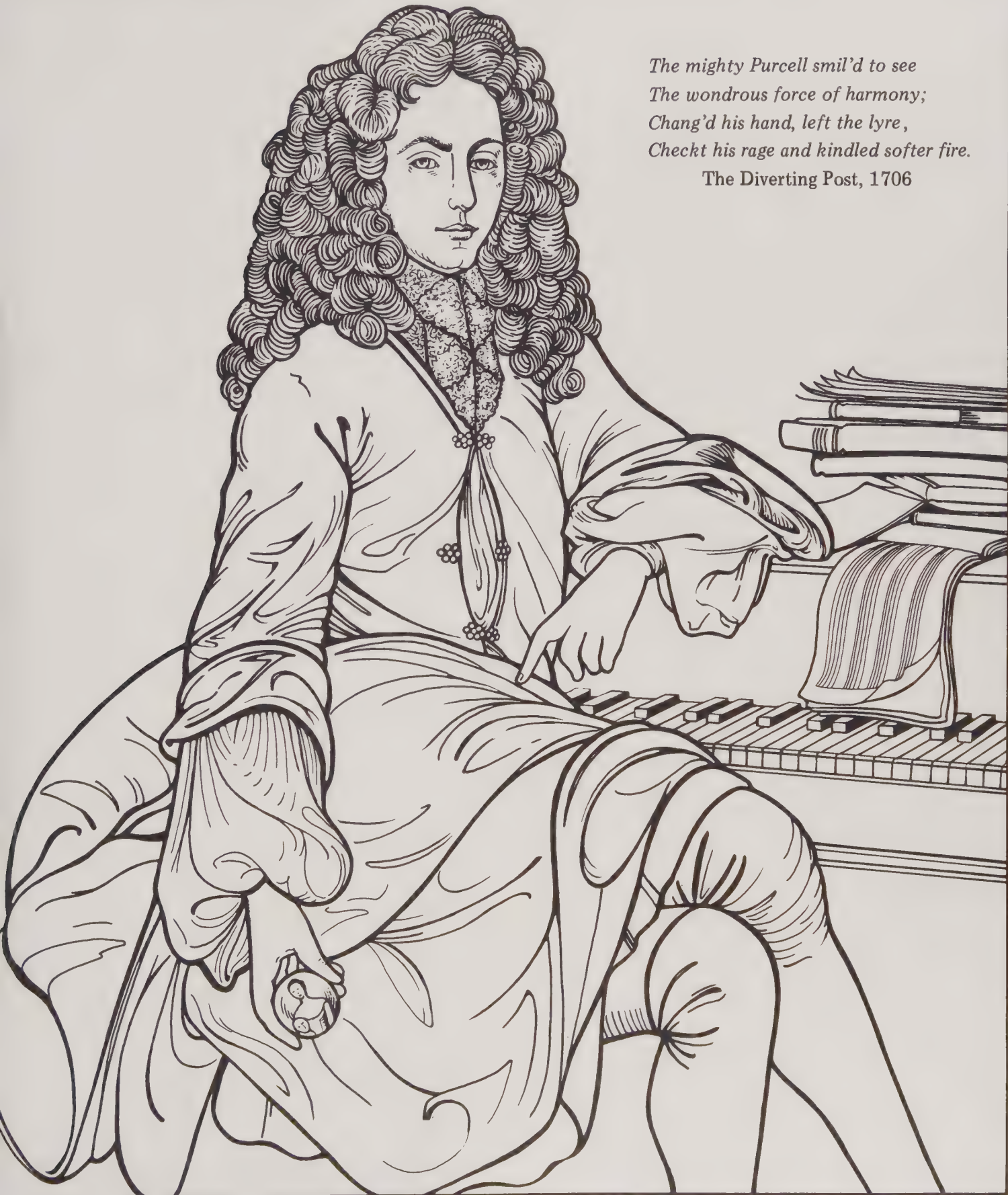
He made almost perfect use of his time. A choirboy in the Chapel Royal (at perhaps as young as six), Purcell became assistant to the keeper of the King's instruments after his voice broke. At eighteen he was violin composer to the King, at twenty organist at Westminster Abbey, at twenty-two organist to the Chapel Royal. He began composing at a very young age (supposedly writing a Birthday Ode to the King when he was only eleven) and began publishing songs when he was sixteen. Adding a few more official titles to his list, he spent the next twenty years providing music for church services, for court celebrations and, more and more, for the flourishing theater.

And the time was right for his music. The newest French and Italian styles were everywhere in the air, but there were also native English composers left whose roots went back to the Golden Age of Queen Elizabeth and King James I. Purcell drew from both of these sources and came up with a style that was both traditional and fashionable, English and international. Writing court pieces when he was in favor and theater works when he was not, he created *Dido and Aeneas*, the first English opera, a number of "semi-operas," and hundreds of odes, anthems and songs. In his last year he wrote songs for nine plays.

But he died at the wrong time. Already recognized as the "British Orpheus," Purcell was only thirty-six and at the height of his powers when he suddenly took ill. His death deprived England of the greatest composer it ever produced and destroyed all hopes for a new English school. For the next two centuries, England had to depend on foreigners for almost all of its best music.

*The mighty Purcell smil'd to see
The wondrous force of harmony;
Chang'd his hand, left the lyre,
Checkt his rage and kindled softer fire.*

The Diverting Post, 1706



Henry Purcell after Clostermann

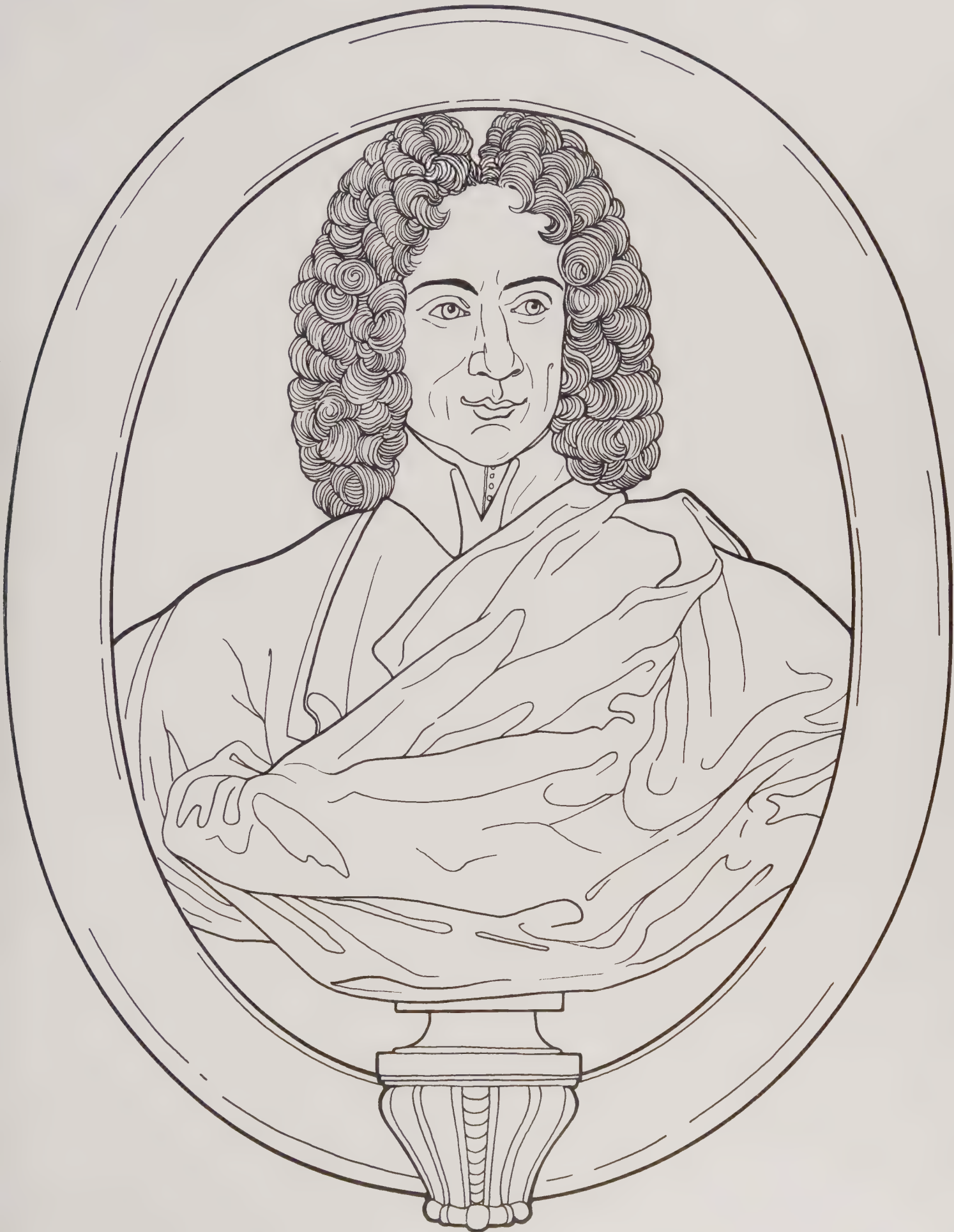
Arcangelo Corelli

1653-1713

At the start of the seventeenth century, the violin was in the same position as the saxophone at the start of the twentieth: it was a scruffy upstart, with none of the elegance or prestige of the lute or viols (let alone the organ). But as polyphonic singing, which could tolerate a gentle lute or viol accompaniment, gave way to solo monody and purely instrumental music, the great range and expressiveness of the violin made it increasingly attractive to innovative composers. At the same time, several generations of Italian violin-makers, led by the Amati family, the Guarneri family and Antonio Stradivari (all of Cremona), developed and refined the instrument, creating violins that have never been surpassed. By the end of the century, an Italian orchestra was essentially a collection of violins.

Putting such an orchestra together was not as easy as it might seem today. The early violinists were willful virtuosos, drunk with the power of their instrument and eager to show off their own skill. It took a supreme virtuoso to put them in their place. Arcangelo Corelli had earned a high reputation as a violinist while he was still a young man. He took his talent to Bologna, where the standard forms of the sonata and the concerto were beginning to take shape. Here he developed as a composer as well; by the time he moved on to Rome, he was considered the finest violinist in Europe. Yet it was as a composer and conductor that he won the support of such patrons as Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni and former Queen Christina of Sweden.

Corelli couldn't escape the exaggerated behavior the public expected of virtuoso violinists — "it was usual for his countenance to be distorted, his eyes to become red as fire and his eyeballs to roll as if in agony" — but his main concern was creating a unified sound from a group of string players. A trio-sonata usually required four instruments, a concerto grosso ten to fifteen; but Corelli once conducted an orchestra of 150 (almost all violins). A strict disciplinarian, he insisted on unison bowing and balance among the various parts of the orchestra. The virtuosos continued to flourish on their own and violins continued to improve — by the end of his life Corelli sometimes seemed an inadequate violinist — but the works he wrote for strings became the first classics of European orchestral music, the first that were still being played a century later.



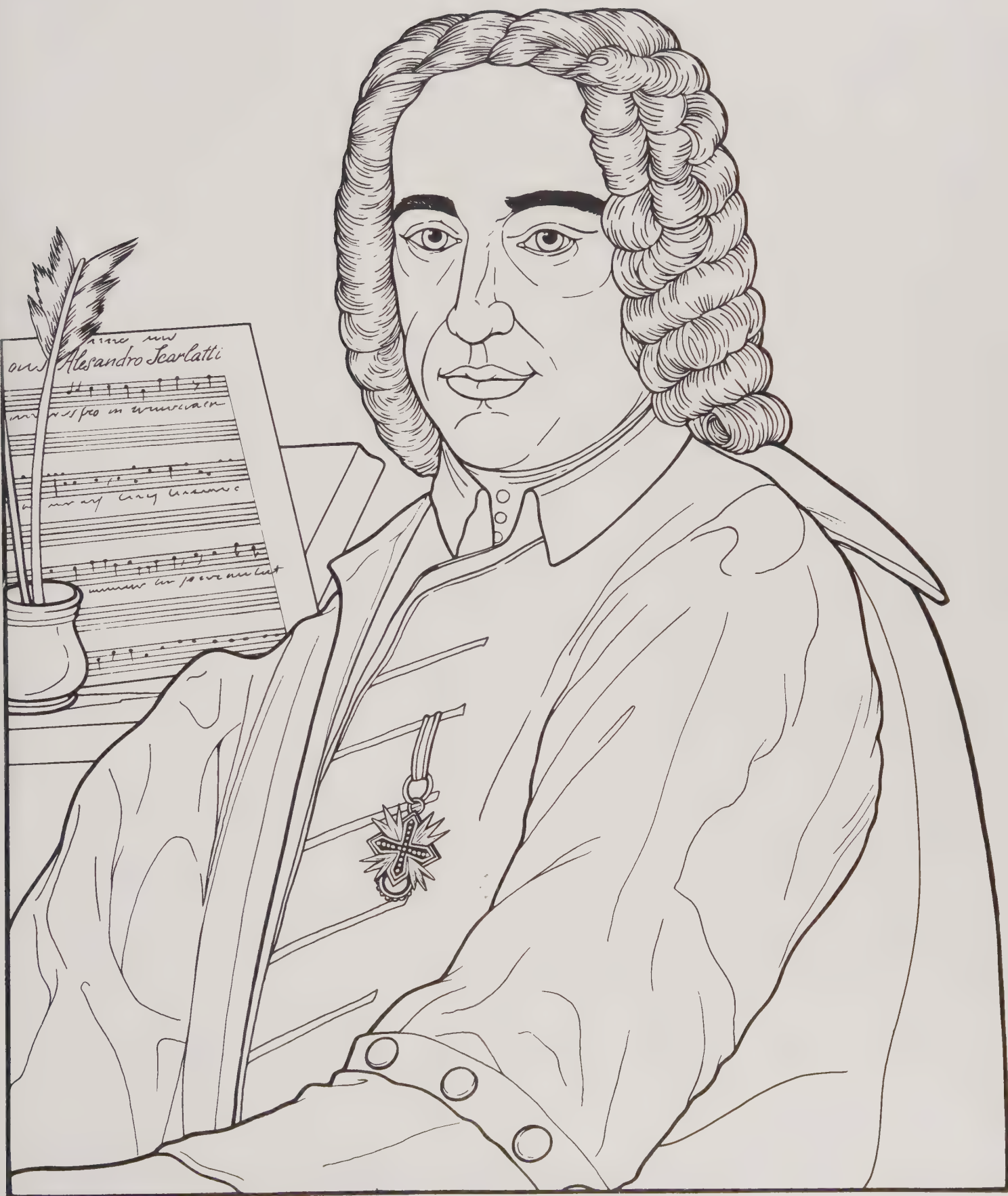
Alessandro Scarlatti

1660-1725

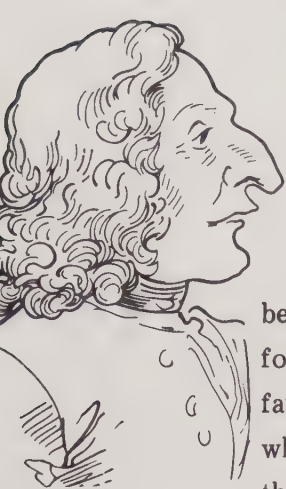
A typical Scarlatti opera might take place in a mythical or historical kingdom. A war might be going on. There might be pirates or brigands at large. There would be, in any case, at least three sets of lovers ready to be set in motion. A could be in love with B, B with C, C with D, D with A and E with B. A letter from B to C would fall in the hands of A. D would put on a disguise to meet with A, but wind up with C instead. E's plot to kill A would be overheard and foiled by D. The whole affair would go on for about three hours, with snatches of recitative dialogue between the characters and some sixty arias sung by one or more of the characters to the audience. The costumes and sets would be very elaborate and, if the noble patron who underwrote the production was wealthy enough, there could be some extravagant mechanical special effects. And there would always be a happy ending.

Scarlatti was in no way responsible for the plots of the operas for which he wrote the music. He had left his home in Palermo, Sicily, when he was twelve to study music in Rome. Immediately successful in both the musical and the social worlds, he won the support of former Queen Christina of Sweden and Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni (both also patrons of Corelli) and saw his first opera performed to great acclaim when he was only nineteen. He proceeded to write, by some accounts, 114 operas and some 800 chamber cantatas (elaborate songs for special occasions), some oratorios and some less important instrumental works. These were almost all special commissions; Scarlatti's job was to make good music out of arbitrary sets of words.

What Scarlatti achieved in his operas and cantatas almost got lost in the flurry of their creation. Moving between Rome and Naples, with occasional excursions to other cities, he spent most of his life creating works that he knew were almost completely ephemeral. His cantatas were meant to be produced only once, his operas rarely more than a dozen times. By the end of his life, most of his works had been forgotten and he was considered old-fashioned. But as he refined his music, he also consolidated the system of keys that was the basis of classical music for the next two centuries; he set the form of the operatic aria for the next century; and he produced some beautiful songs that are only getting their second hearing today.



Alessandro Scarlatti after the portrait in the *Liceo Musicale*, Bologna



Vivaldi, 1723,
Vatican Library

Antonio Vivaldi

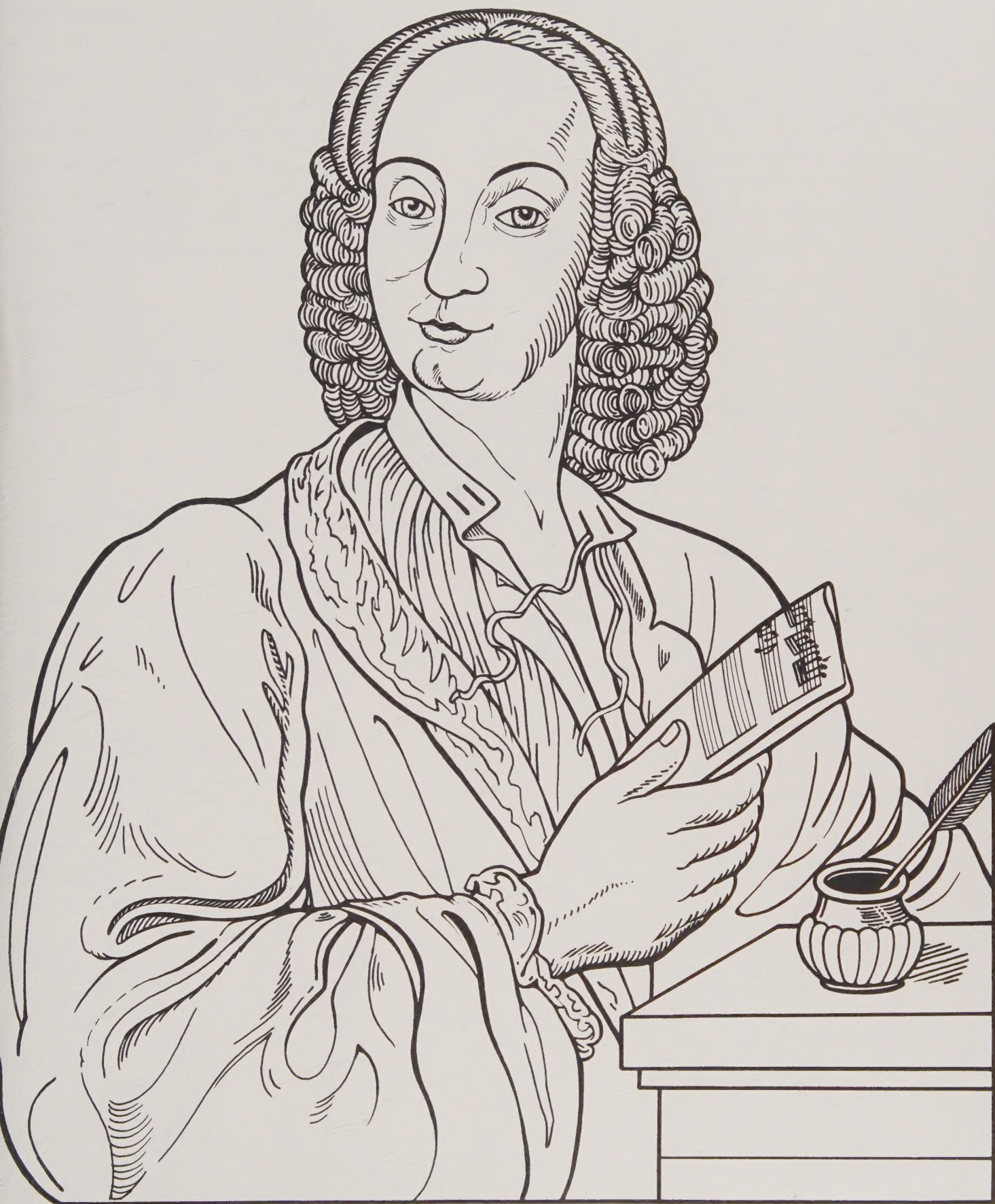
1678-1741

The Vivaldi family had had its ups and downs. One branch had once been prominent in the government of Genoa and others had made their fortunes elsewhere in northern Italy. But Giovanni Battista Vivaldi, whose father had been a baker, was working as a barber and violinist in Venice when his eldest son Antonio was born. He must have been hoping to raise the family's status and income when he dedicated the fifteen-year-old Antonio to the Catholic priesthood. As added insurance, he himself gave the boy a thorough musical education. Both parts of his strategy worked well. Antonio was ordained a priest in 1703 and took a post teaching violin at the *Ospedale della Pietà* orphanage for girls a few months later. With its huge supply of trainable musicians, the *Pietà* was one of the centers of Venetian musical life, and Antonio Vivaldi was soon earning four times as much as his father.

He was always a very strange priest. Everyone noticed his bright red hair and his great show of piety. Yet he stopped saying mass a few years after his ordination — he suffered from a debilitating disease, possibly asthma — and carried out few other priestly duties. His value to the *Pietà* lay in his teaching skills and then, overwhelmingly, in his prodigious outpouring of music for the students to perform. Shortly after taking up his post, he began to publish his works for the outside world; in 1711 he produced *L'estro armonico*, set of concertos which established the solo concerto style for the next generation. The *Pietà* was soon flooded with his students and admirers.

By then Vivaldi was himself beginning to move out into the larger musical world. He composed and then produced operas in Venice and other Italian cities. After 1718, he was almost always on leave from the *Pietà*, travelling as far afield as Prague and Amsterdam to direct operas and concerts. The governors of the *Pietà* tried to restrict his travels but had to content themselves with his agreement to provide two concertos a month for the students to perform. Critics of his un priestly behavior — he sold his works for the highest possible price and travelled with two women companions — were no more successful.

It was a change of style that finally brought Vivaldi down. By the late 1730s, his concertos and operas were out-of-date. Travelling north to recoup his fortune, he took ill in Vienna and died a pauper.

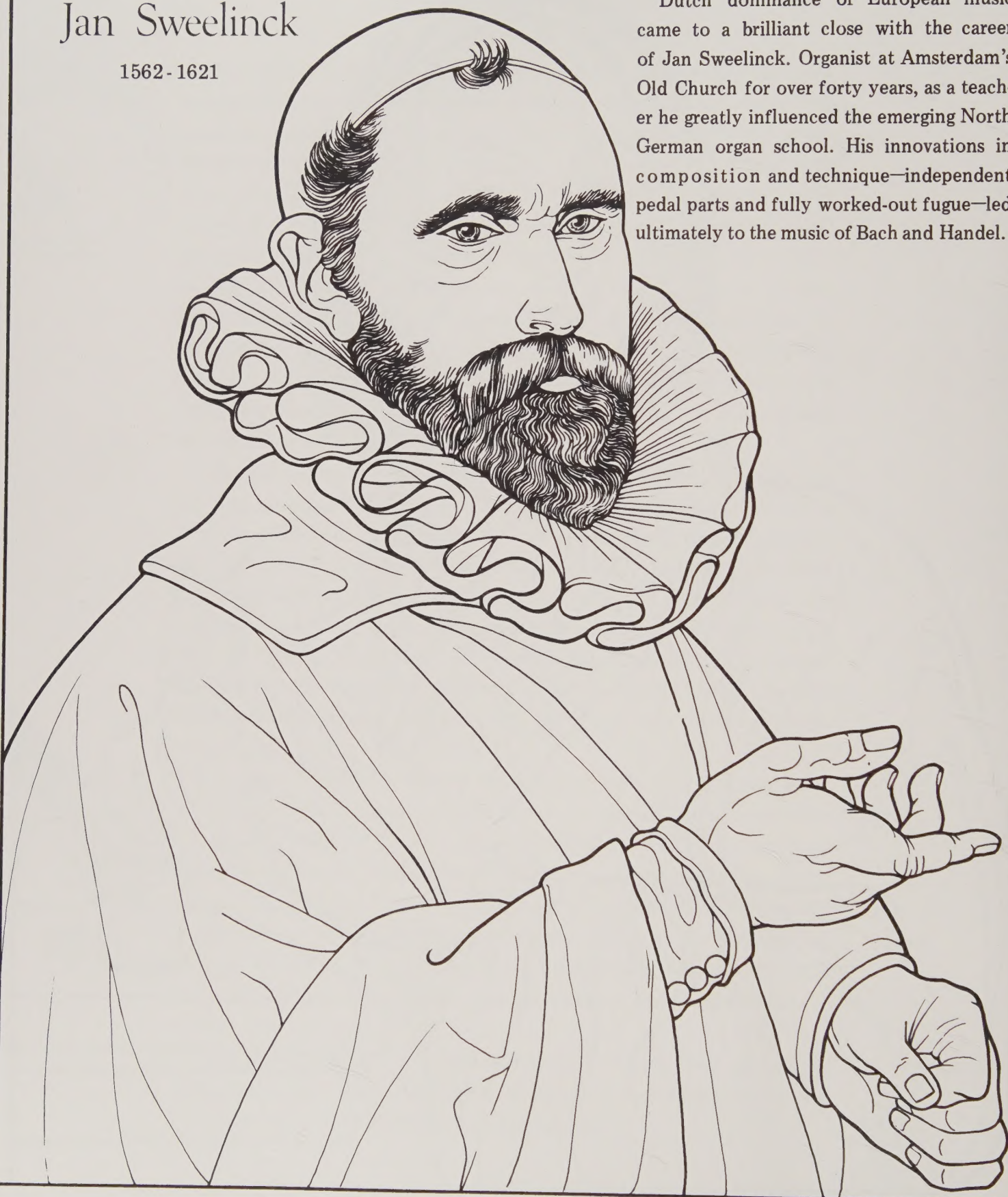


Antonio Vivaldi after La Cave's engraving, c. 1724

Jan Sweelinck

1562-1621

Dutch dominance of European music came to a brilliant close with the career of Jan Sweelinck. Organist at Amsterdam's Old Church for over forty years, as a teacher he greatly influenced the emerging North German organ school. His innovations in composition and technique—-independent pedal parts and fully worked-out fugue—led ultimately to the music of Bach and Handel.



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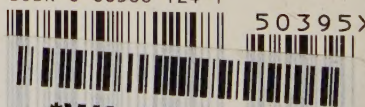
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